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# Library Services and Construction Act: Testimonies (1994): Speech 17

Beverly Choltco-Devlin

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Testimony of Beverly Choltco-Devlin  
Director, Morrisville Public Library  
Project GAIN Site Coordinator  
for United States Senate Hearing  
April 19, 1994

This testimony is true and not so different from what might emanate from any number of public libraries across the United States. The problems and, more importantly, the potentialities are very real. Though this voice is a small one it speaks passionately and strongly for many. I would only ask that you listen thoughtfully and carefully enough to see the power for change that you can effect.

### REALITIES AND POTENTIALITIES

In September of 1992, the Morrisville Public Library in central New York State was in serious danger of closing its doors. The village of Morrisville and the surrounding town of Eaton typify the rural environment of America in the 90's. The main industry in this area is dairy farming and the community, due to its physical isolation and poverty, is not yet the beneficiary of the economic recovery. The borders are yet a bit too far.

As a result of the fiscal straits experienced by the village and town and many like them across central New York (and indeed the country), the community, while sincerely funding the library to the best of its ability, was unable to keep pace with the rising costs of operations. As a consequence, hours were curtailed and the death knell reverberated in the not-to-far distance. To add to the burden, the previous director chose to retire. The library, through the sheer determination of its Board of Trustees, one-quarter time staff member and volunteers, struggled through the winter months of 1992 on reduced hours, with staff and volunteers wearing extra sweaters to keep warm, turning lights on only when a patron was using a particular room, shutting off the hot water, and delivering overdue notices in person to save postage.

In January of 1994, the Board hired me as the new director, and shortly thereafter word of Project GAIN (Global Access Information Network), a pilot project and study which would connect 5 rural libraries and one Native American School to the Internet, was brought to my attention. This project would provide all hardware and software necessary for connectivity, a year of full Internet access, access to 6 commercial online bibliographic databases and a set stipend to cover telecommunications charges. The purpose of the project was to determine if a small rural library without the financial resources to do so on their own were given all the means to have access to the Internet, would there be a beneficial impact on the community. I jumped at the chance and applied for participation as a project site. Fortunately, we were selected to participate and in July of 1993 (less than a year ago) our connection to the rest of the world began.

The story of the journey of our library's near-death experience to its burgeoning capacity for positively impacting the community (and, as you shall see, the world) can be directly traced to our participation in this project.

The findings of the study have shown Project GAIN to be a remarkable success. The degree of positive impact that our participation in this project has had on our library, our community, and indeed the global community could not have been foreseen and is truly remarkable. Indeed the benefits are still unfolding on a daily basis. Following are a few of the many examples of impact. While we are still fiscally prudent, the library is now thriving and well.

#### o Magic in Morrisville - Literacy

A wondrous and miraculous thing has occurred as a direct result the Morrisville Library's participation in Project GAIN. In addition to my role as director of the Morrisville Library, I have also been a Literacy Volunteer for 5 years. I received my training through a course offered by the library. My student, a 51 year old dairy farmer somehow managed to get through the 9th grade with less than a first grade reading level. When he first came to me he quite literally could not read a single sentence. We had been working together for a little while when I felt it might be a good idea to have Glenn do some of his homework on the computer. He began by writing simple stories only a few sentences long. While he still had quite a way to go to become a proficient reader, working on the computer seemed to increase his self-esteem.

One night last August the serendipitous idea struck me that we should send out a request on PUBLIB (a listserv for public library issues) for other new adult learners to correspond with. Glenn composed a short email message introducing himself and magic happened. The response was overwhelming. We received many replies from new learners and also from others offering to be mentors. Glenn is currently writing to several new learners across the country and is even writing to a man from Brazil who is learning english. He has become a type of mentor to students who have only just begun to read and has agreed to relinquish his anonymity to help others in his situation. A search for an electronic discussion group about Literacy issues surprisingly revealed that none existed. In an effort to fill a void that obviously needed filling I am now the moderator of two electronic discussion groups devoted to literacy (thanks to NYSERNet's generous offer to sponsor them). LEARNER is a group for new learners to write to one another to practice their developing skills and to establish keypal contacts and most importantly to have the chance to talk with someone else in their same situation. In a rural environment where people are so isolated from one another, this capacity to communicate with other people who have made the brave decision to overcome their inability to read is critical.

LITERACY is a forum for the discussion of literacy issues in by anyone who is interested. The value of these types of forums cannot be underestimated. If given access, a person who is learning to read is not only developing reading literacy skills but computer and network literacy skills as well: all three skill which are critical for productive participation in the

information age.

The remarkable results of Glenn's courageous posting that one evening in August show that not only is access critical for the benefit of the rural community but it also shows how we can contribute to the larger global community.

#### o Reference

Because our resources are so limited (our total operating budget, including salaries was \$20,000 in 1993), an up-to-date reference collection is difficult to maintain. Our connection has become my reference tool of first choice. By simply logging on I was able to assist patrons in finding information on a wide variety of topics. In many cases and after some training patrons are able to access the requested information themselves. A few examples of our many successes include:

-- A patron and I were able to locate information by the FDA on the tools used in an atheroscopy and angioplasty, two procedures he was scheduled to undergo. The patron related to me that he felt much more informed about his condition and that he was able to talk to his physician in an intelligent and informed manner.

-- A young teenage girl came in and asked for information regarding bulimia and anorexia. We were able to find several items for her.

-- I was able to locate information regarding bacterial contamination of milk for an attorney working on a case for a local dairy farmer.

-- I was requested by the village and town boards to look for grant possibilities which might be of benefit to our community and do periodic searches for the village and town boards on a variety of topics after attending the meetings.

-- A county judge who had for several months unsuccessfully attempted to track down an elusive newspaper article from 1870 for a presentation he was doing came to our library as a last resort. (He had already tried two university libraries) Because of our access to the online bibliographic databases I was able to locate what I thought might be the article he was looking for at 3 universities nationwide. With a mixture of trepidation and excitement I called the University of Virginia and asked them to fax me a copy of the article. My patron had the article in his hands within a day.

-- An elderly patron was concerned about a mysterious condition affecting his lips. A search of research articles resulted in a series of studies showing that a particular medication the patron was on could cause photosensitivity resulting in inflammation of the lips. The patron was able to download the information, take it to his doctor and have his prescription changed.

-- A middle school student needed up-to-date information regarding Mauritania. With assistance the student was able to download the latest information provided on this country in the CIA World Factbook.

-- A business professor was able to locate information for one of his students regarding economic conditions in former Eastern Bloc countries via the Economic Bulletin Board.

#### **o Communication**

Living in a rural community often prevents communication and exchange of ideas with others because of physical and cultural isolation. Because our library offers direct patron access to the Internet, the people in our community have been able to communicate with others throughout the world on a variety of topics. Because communication is an interactive process, our community members have taken advantage of the access they have to both receive information and, as importantly, provide information to the larger global community. Because of our connection, members of our community can simultaneously experience and relate both uniqueness and common experience shared by all human beings.

Several patrons have subscribed to different "Listservs" (electronic mail discussion groups) and monitor them on a regular basis.

-- One of our patrons, an adult survivor of child abuse, was able to find a usenet discussion group on this topic and now has an "electronic" support group.

-- Another elderly man was an active ham radio operator but is now almost completely deaf. He is able to correspond with other ham operators by email.

-- A local journalist has subscribed to a writers' listserv and contributes to it regularly.

-- Children as young as age seven have developed written relationships with "keypals" (electronic mail penpals).

-- A local resident is able to correspond via email on a regular basis with his brother who is currently working in Denmark.

Our connection has helped to facilitate communication between myself and other librarians through participation in electronic mail and discussion groups (Listservs). This capability has assisted me in my professional development and has helped me to become a better librarian.

In fact our electronic connection facilitated the development of a cooperative grant proposal between our site and one of the other Project GAIN sites. The entire planning process took place electronically using email and fax capabilities provided with our connection.

#### **o Cooperation**

Our connection has helped to bring about a greater spirit of cooperation between different community groups and institutions.

-- Our local school system does not have Internet access as of yet. We have helped the school by forwarding much information of an educational nature to them. For example, our students are participating in a pilot project to learn Japanese, and I was able to provide them with additional cultural information about Japan.

I have done demonstrations for the Middle School (curriculum studies), the High School Seniors for career day. I was able to show them the many Campus Wide Information Systems available online and scholarship and grant resources. Many students were also interested in the Job Listings which can be found online.

-- I also did a demonstration for the Rotary Club and was able to point them to many resources regarding business which are available.

-- I do periodic searches for the Youth Commission, the Village and Town Boards, the Rotary Club, and the Cooperative Extension.

#### o Community

Because of the increased visibility which the library has received as a result of our connection and the incredible amount of use which has taken place, discussion has taken place regarding the potential development of a Community Net. Our Project GAIN connection has acted as a catalyst and motivating force behind a new and revitalized "can-do" attitude in our community. The library is increasingly becoming an Information Resource Center. As a result of the many demonstrations for groups and training sessions, community organizations are asking to meet in the library. For example the Youth Commission met at the library this past week. One significant component of the meeting included developing an electronic newsletter which the young people in the community could put together. "Keypals" will be a major component of the summer youth program with the older children helping the younger to compose email messages. The Garden Club also chose to meet in the library this year. At the next meeting I will be giving a demonstration of the many Community Nets which have an electronic "greenhouse." Many have expressed an interest in setting up our own community network.

As previously noted, one of the most significant problems regarding rural access involves geographic isolation. The interest shown in our connection has been so incredible that I have had to put up a schedule sheet for people to use the connection as I often have patrons waiting in line.

The next natural step and one which patrons have been requesting is dial-in access to our connection. It is especially important that members of a community which is widely spread out geographically, especially those who are homebound or cannot get to the library itself (i.e., children, the disabled and the elderly).

#### o Increase in Funding

As a result of the library's revitalized position in the community which was effected by our participation in Project GAIN, the library received a modest increase in funding from the Town of Eaton this year. Members of the Board came up to me personally after the meetings and expressed to me that they wished that it could have been even more.

### **Barriers to Access**

The previous testimony has unequivocally shown that there is a critical need and demand for electronic access to information in a rural setting. It is even more evident that people living in a rural environment are physically, culturally and intellectually isolated from each other and the rest of the world. Project GAIN has shown that connectivity provides an excellent way to alleviate that isolation. Rural dwellers must be given the opportunity to participate fully in the Information Age. It is a logical and natural conclusion that the public library is the institution of choice to function as the "safety-net" for electronic access to information. Public libraries have traditionally been the one government sponsored institution which has the potential to benefit each and every member of the community young or old, rich or poor. As can be seen from the examples given, connectivity to the information superhighway can provide.

A reality check will show that the successes highlighted above have not come effortlessly. The findings of the study show that there are definite barriers to access which must be addressed in order to ensure equal access of all people in the United States to the Information Superhighway.

Such barriers to access include:

#### **o Telecommunications Issues**

Morrisville Library's participation in Project GAIN was much more successful than even I imagined (and I had quite high hopes for the project). Patrons came in to use our connection on a daily basis, either directly or through mediated access. Because our site was required to dial-in to a Point-of-Presence (POP) in Syracuse to make the connection and due to the amount of traffic we were generating, our library was incurring long distance phone charges of at least \$150 - \$200 per month. This amount represents a substantial percentage of our operating budget and absorbing into our operating cost would present significant problems.

#### **o Training**

Proper and ongoing training is crucial to the success of a project like Project GAIN. One can be given the most expensive and state-of-the art hardware, software and access, but unless one knows how to use the tools, the access is meaningless. Fortunately we had the benefit of training in workshop format both at NYSErNet and through on-site visits. The most beneficial training took place via daily email contact with the support staff provided by NYSErNet.

In addition, I chose to provide direct patron access to the Internet at the Morrisville Library. I firmly believe that public libraries must serve a two-fold function if they are to serve as the "safety-net." Libraries must, of course, provide access to information either through direct or mediated means. I feel also that it is a critical component of fulfilling the safety-net role involves education. This is especially crucial in our rural environment where many patrons are so poor that they cannot afford computers in the home or courses at a college. To fulfill that role, we offer workshops, individual tutoring, and demonstrations to groups who are eager to learn more about the "information superhighway." Unless there is a commitment to such training both for staff and patrons, access will necessarily be limited.

#### **o Time**

Our site is staffed only by myself and my assistant. Learning to use the connection, training patrons in the use of the connection and providing Internet based services to the Internet all have to be accomplished while maintaining the existing services. These requirements take time, and while I feel the resulting benefits are more than worth the time put into the project, the issue must be addressed. The implementation of the connection was an add-on duty. At our site we did not discontinue any of our services as a result of our connection. Instead, many of the routine duties were reassigned to volunteers or performed less frequently. Time management, especially in a poor underfunded library, is of paramount importance. However, the benefits to our library because we did make that time commitment have been incalculable.

#### **o Type of Equipment**

Our grant provided Macintosh computers and because I was previously comfortable with the Macintoshes the use of such a platform was not an issue for me personally. However, it was an issue for many of my patrons, my co-coordinator, and quite a few of the other sites. People who were only comfortable with IBM-compatible computers had to first learn a new operating system before they could do anything constructive with the Internet itself.

I spent quite a bit of time giving lessons to patrons on using the Macintosh before we were ever able to log-on. The findings of the study and my own personal view is that one of two things must exist: there must be complete training in the platform chosen as the vehicle for access to the Internet or multiple platform access must be offered. Although I prefer the Macintosh platform for myself, I feel that in order to truly provide equal access effectively and efficiently, the latter scenario is the more reasonable and workable one.

In addition, more than just text is available via the network and my patrons are requesting access to that information. Images and graphics are commonly needed and fortunately for us we were given the software and hardware which allows us to fully access such resources. However, through my experience and speaking with many others who have access, this is not always the case.



It is critical that libraries be provided with "user-friendly" equipment and software. On a specific note, it is also critical that the monitors be large enough or font-size have the capacity to be increased to accommodate the needs of our visually impaired patrons.

#### **o Access to the Computer**

Our connection has been so popular that I often have patrons waiting in line to use it. I have had to set up a schedule sheet for patron use and training sessions. Our hours of operation are still somewhat limited because of budget considerations and there seems to be peak times for use. Often I must tell the patrons to come back later. Because I am often the only person on duty I conduct the training sessions on my day off so that we won't be interrupted. Multiple access points (preferably multi platform) are a critical need.

#### **o Complexity of the Internet**

Because the Internet is so new in terms of public access and because resources are being added on a minute-by minute basis, there is a great deal of complexity and lack of true organization in the electronic world. I am still often overwhelmed by the multi-layered maze like quality to the net. Navigating the resources without proper training can be "frustrating and intimidating" (McClure, p.29).

#### **o Need for Full Text**

When one is working with a resource as powerful and complex as the Internet, there is the danger of expecting it to be many things that it hasn't become yet (though there is definite movement in some of these directions). Many of my patrons expect that they will be able to download full-text information on any given source. I was able to download the entire "Song of Hiawatha" for one of our older patrons who wanted to use it as a part of a birthday present for her husband, but the unrealistic expectation is that I can do that for any work. Complex copyright and access issues must be addressed concerning full-text provision.

#### **o Geographic Isolation**

As previously noted geographic isolation is one of the most significant barriers to access of information in a rural environment. Our connection has significantly reduced the implications of that barrier, but it is only part of the story. Lack of an effective public transportation system often prevents community members from getting to the library itself. With increasing proliferation of computers in the home, provision of remote access to our facility is a constant request. As the information resource center in our community, it would be a logical and effective step to have dial-in capability to our connection.

#### **o Continuation of Connection**

Finally, the most important and frightening barrier to access will come when the project ends in June and our connection is terminated. Unless other funding is obtained all of the remarkable stories such as those previously testified to will abruptly cease. The good work will end. My patrons will be disenfranchised and will once again become part of the information have-nots. Our local funding sources are supporting us to the best of their ability but are realistically unable to maintain the connection to it full capacity. The reality is in June the our voice to the world will be silenced.

### Breaking Down the Barriers

The rural community has much to offer the world. While many speak of access solely in terms of what can be downloaded or received I prefer to think of access as a more fluid dynamic process in which we can give to the world as well as receive. Without our connection my Literacy Student might not be able to continue his encouragement to other new reader to continue their studies. The world might never learn that the Morrisville Library houses original documents and manuscripts regarding the abolitionist movement, Gerrit Smith, John Brown and the Civil War. An adult survivor of child abuse in another state might never benefit from the experience which my patron generously shares with the Usenet group.

While there can be no one solution to the many barriers to access there are many possibilities and requirements which can be effected if vision and a true sense of the necessity for equal access in the maintenance of a democratic society.

Some of these include:

- o The telecommunication barriers in a rural setting must be dealt with.

Some suggested solutions include:

- Points-of-Presence must be locally available.
- Exploration into the elimination of LATA's for network connections and educational use is one option.  
(Polly)
- Reliable and cost effective connections (a minimum of 56kbps). (Polly)

- o Recognition and utilization of the skills and commitment of professional information providers, i.e. librarians

- Professional librarians are currently being trained in a variety of technological areas including bibliographic instruction, online database searching, network management, setting up LANS.

- As service professionals they are trained and strategically positioned to bridge the gap

between technology and the user.

-- The library professionals' expertise in the organization and classification of information should be brought to bear in bringing some order to the admittedly sometimes chaotic state of the Internet.

- o Given the above, recognition of the public library as the most logical place for providing public access and education regarding electronic connectivity.

- o Facilitation for strong training programs. The most modern highway system in the world is useless if people don't know how to drive.

- o Provisions for "user-friendly" on-site infrastructure including hardware and software. That same highway will sit idle if users don't have access to vehicles.

- o A commitment by government to use of the super-highway by the local public sector. For example 20% bandwidth allotment for local programming.

- o Assistance in funding small pilot projects such as Project GAIN to ensure that rural areas and other disenfranchised communities are given full participation in the Information Age.

- o Exploration of the development of community networks.

The federal government has made a forward-thinking and visionary philosophical commitment to equal access to the information highway. It is imperative that a fiscal commitment be made as well. It is hoped that this testimony has shown what a small poor library in the middle of dairy country can do if a positive attitude and the resources to try are in place. Please help give other communities the same opportunities. Such an investment can only help foster full realization of the potential that each person in this country.

McClure, C.M. et al. The Project GAIN Report: Connecting Rural Libraries to the Internet  
Information Management Consultant Services, Inc., 1994.